The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife–this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.

— W.E.B. DuBois
The Souls of Black Folk

An African-American Reader
ESSAYS ON AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

An African-American Reader

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

ESSAYS ON AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Edited by: William R. Scott and William G. Shade

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Table of Contents

Tables, Charts and Maps for An African-American Reader

Preface

William Gray III

It gives me great pleasure to write this Preface for what I regard as a very important book. *An African-American Reader* was commissioned by the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs to complement its "American Reader" series by focusing on a major facet of American life that will have great resonance for many overseas audiences. Half of the essays deal with African-American history up through the 1960s, and half are directed toward aspects of African-American life in the more recent past. All of them are informed by a deep sense of the long journey our people have taken since being forcibly brought to these shores

As we try to judge the position of African Americans in today's world and look toward reaching the goal of a truly color-blind society, we must begin with a clear view of the vibrant history of the African-American community and the diversity of African-American experience. When one looks at the images of black America carried around the globe by the miracle of television, it is easy to forget that these images, though powerful, fail to represent the lives of the vast majority of African Americans and consequently who we really are.

During my lifetime legal segregation has been ended and wide areas of opportunity have been opened up. I can remember drinking from a "colored" water fountain. Little more than a generation ago, I and other blacks could not do certain things by law in this country simply because of our skin color. It was not until 1964 that Congress passed the historic Civil Rights Act that made it possible for me to stay in the Holiday Inn in Mississippi. A year later, the Voting Rights Act guaranteed that someone of my color in Alabama could go to the polls and vote for elected officials. In the year I was born, 92 percent of all African Americans were living below the poverty line. As this century begins, it is about 26 percent, still far above the national average of 13 percent, but a vast improvement over what it has historically been. So when I recall the past, I marvel at how far we've come.

Yet in numerous ways, both large and small, white racism remains to constrict the aspirations of black Americans and to cast a shadow on the American Dream. I agree with Martin Luther King, Jr. that our goal should be a color-blind society, but I also think it is obvious that you cannot reverse three-and-a-half centuries in one generation. The combination of economic and educational deprivation throughout our history has had devastating consequences for African Americans — consequences that cannot be erased in a few decades. It takes time to redress past inequities. If all compensatory remedies were stopped today, we would leave in place many of the inequities of 365 years. There are examples of progress, but the fact remains that if we stop struggling for justice, we will fail to produce a society with true equality of opportunity and turn our backs on the promises of the Declaration of Independence.

Several years ago, looking at trends in education, and looking at where I believed this country needed to go, I decided to leave the United States Congress and devote my life to promoting black education. In the next century, the United States will face keen competition from abroad. A united European community has become a political reality. Economic goliaths on the Pacific Rim will be our major economic competitors. America cannot afford to enter the 21st century without enlisting all of its brainpower. To do so means making sure that the underprivileged and disadvantaged youth who are now locked in our urban inner cities and in our rural poor areas get a chance to become competent, productive, and contributing members of our society. If we do not continue to extend our nation's opportunities to all of our citizens, then we as a society will have failed. As this century begins, the largest percent-

age of the new work force in the United States will come from three groups: women, minorities, and new immigrants. It simply makes good sense to invest in education and provide opportunity for a new generation if we are to have growth and opportunity for all Americans.

Are there new approaches that we may have to employ as we make greater progress? Yes. And we have to work those out together as one people, for to play upon the fears of one another would be to allow those who are scarred and battered in both of our communities to take center stage. That would be a great tragedy. We must reach a common agenda, the agenda that bound us so closely together in the struggle for equal justice thirty and forty years ago. We may have disagreements on strategies, but we can never disagree on the ultimate goal of a color-blind society. We must insist that leaders, no matter who they are or where they are, speak to a common agenda and not play to the fears and the worst in us.

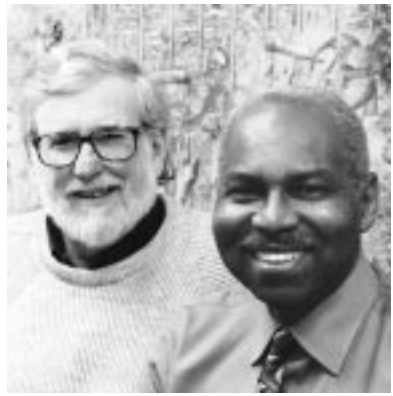
Understanding is based upon education. We must learn another community's history if we are to understand them. We must strive to witness their sufferings and achievements. We must hasten to comprehend both the simplicity and the complexity of their lives and open our minds to imagine seeing their world as they see it, whether they are rich or poor, of high station in life or low. We must try to dream their dreams and suffer their disappointments and misfortunes.

This book, *An African-American Reader*, by educating readers throughout the world about the African American community and its history, can serve the cause of international understanding, for it offers an opportunity for those outside the United States whose understanding of the African-American community is too often a matter of headlines to penetrate more deeply into our history and to reflect on its depth and its complexity. Those readers will be able to confront its essentially paradoxical nature, reflected in what W.E.B. DuBois called our "double consciousness." As he wrote, a century ago in *The Souls of Black Folk:*

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.

The Long and Rugged Road

William R. Scott and William G. Shade



> We are the children of the black sharecroppers, the first-born of the city tenements. We have tramped down a road three hundred years long. We have been shunted to and fro by cataclysmic social changes. We are a folk born of cultural devastation, slavery, physical suffering, unrequited longing, abrupt emancipation, migration, disillusionment, bewilderment, joblessness, and insecurity — all enacted within a short space of historical time.
>
> Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941)

Americans of African descent have struggled a long time to survive and thrive in a democracy originally conceived by and for Americans from Europe. Plagued by pervasive color proscriptions and prejudices since their ancestors' forced passage to the New World nearly 400 years ago, they have persistently striven to overcome racial adversity. Even now, after victories over slavery and segregation, vestiges of discrimination persist and repress black progress. Likewise, demeaning racial myths and stereotypes, bitter debate of welfare policy and affirmative action, hostility to residential integration, brazen displays of the Confederate flag, and ghastly hate crimes committed by white supremacists continue to fan the flames of racial antagonism. So does the alienation caused by dire ghetto poverty and the rash rhetoric of black extremists who castigate whites as a demon race.

The marked integration since the 1960s of blacks in fields such as business, law, education, entertainment, government, sports, television, and the military — sometimes at very high levels — suggests that despite the divisions caused by racial antipathy not an unsubstantial number of Americans have outwardly and inwardly rejected racism — the assertion of the superiority of one race over another. Increased amounts of social interaction across racial boundaries evidenced for instance in interracial dating and marriages also provide evidence of the color line's erosion. Debate abounds, however, on how far the nation must still go to effectively eradicate remaining barriers to racial justice. There's no accord on the distance we must still travel to reach the proverbial "promised land" where no one will be judged by the color of their skin but only by the content of their character.

OUT OF AFRICA

W. E. B. DuBois, who left the United States at the late age of 93 to live the end of his long life in exile in the newly independent African nation of Ghana, was one of the first historians of the black experience to note the longevity of the black presence in North America. In his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois recognized a century ago that blacks had come to America's shores far in advance of the ancestors of most Americans. Records of the arrival in the 17th century of some 20 African captives at Jamestown, Virginia, caused him to observe that the Negro had as much claim to America as the Anglo-Saxon, that Africans had reached British America even before the persecuted band of English Puritans had arrived at Plymouth Rock. "Before the Pilgrims landed aboard the *Mayflower*," declared DuBois, "we were here."

Few Americans are aware, even a century later, that the ancestors of the nation's 34 million African Americans, almost 13 percent of the population, crossed the Atlantic in chains in massive waves during the initial European colonization and conquest of the New World. Aside from scholars, the public is mostly unaware that the black presence in America antedated the migrations of the Scotch-Irish and Germans in the 18th century and long preceded the "old" migration of Catholic Irish and Germans in the mid-19th century as well as the "new" migration of southern and eastern Europeans in the decades before World War I. A result is our society has commonly ignored facts that explain the vastly different experiences of black and white Americans.

It is true that a sizeable number of white immigrants came to the New World in the 17th and 18th centuries as indentured servants or as convicts sentenced to overseas labor. But the majority of Europeans migrated voluntarily. And, although many endured prejudice and penury, all were extended — in relatively short order — the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness embraced in the country's Declaration of Independence. Africans, in contrast, arrived involuntarily and were commonly denied basic human rights. In fact, blacks were typically discriminated against in England's American colonies before the legal codification of chattel slavery. This drastic distinction between the experiences of Americans from Africa and those from Europe, which prepared the pattern for future race relations, was driven by economic and emotional factors. Among these was the decision of settler planters to build an agricultural economy based on enslaved black labor when faced with a shortage of white servants and the pejorative perceptions of blackness imbedded in the culture of Elizabethan England and Enlightenment Europe that inspired a racial ideology that starkly divided the world into black and white.

Joseph C. Miller reveals the crucial connection between the rise of plantation economies in the New World tropics and the emergence there of racial slavery. He describes the appearance of a new trading system based on the sale of human beings between the 15th and 18th centuries that brought Europe, Africa, America together in a dynamic network that produced far-reaching riches and ruin simultaneously. Miller also points out the derivations and destinations of the slaves. He notes that captured Africans were taken to the Americas from every inhabited part of Africa's Atlantic coast and that most — over 85 percent — of those Africans who survived the ocean voyage found themselves laboring as slaves on the sugar islands of the Caribbean or in Portuguese Brazil. Only a small minority — about 5 percent of the total — were carried to British North America.

An especially controversial aspect of the Atlantic slave trade is the volume of people who were transported to the Americas between 1450 and 1850 and the number who expired in the course of capture and rupture from home. Estimates and guesses vary but scholars now generally agree that between 11 and 13 million Africans were seized, shackled and sold into overseas bondage and that about 10 million survived the deadly oceanic crossing to the Americas known as the "middle passage," which slave ships typically completed within 40-69 days.

Another contentious point comes from the fact that the slave trade involved enterprise and exchanges between the agents of European merchants and monarchies and African princes and principalities. How could Africans, it is asked, seize and sell other Africans for sale as slaves? How could they join in the abuse of their own people? A main part of the answer is that African slave dealers usually shared no cultural ties with those they sold since the captives came typically from other ethnic groups and were viewed as aliens without legal rights. This was because until after the European domination of Africa in the 19th century, Africans held no trans-ethnic or continental awareness of themselves. Between the time of the first and final passage of captured persons across the Atlantic, Africans saw themselves as they had for thousands of years: as members of specific kinship groups rather than as members of an African race.

SLAVERY

In 1619, African captives arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent settlement in British North America. But it took just about a century for a stratified biracial society to emerge in the colonies. This early period of provincial America, as portrayed by Jean R. Soderlund, witnessed the evolution of the legal status of chattel slavery — essentially new to the English common law — and its codification by colonial magistrates throughout Britain's American provinces. It was the evolving caste system of racial slavery that led to the petrification in the colonies of previous English prejudices toward the lower classes, outsiders, and darker races and produced the emergence of white racism in the 18th century.

Initially, the black population of the British mainland colonies was small. It began to grew rapidly, however, at the end of 17th century when the British actively entered the slave trade. By 1700 the number of African Americans had reached about 25,000 — nearly all of whom were slaves and who constituted 11 percent of the total population. The rising demand for forced labor to cultivate large-scale cash crops led to the mass importation of African slaves in the 18th century, which along with the natural increase of the slave population, produced a distinctive black presence in provincial America.

By the middle of the 18th century, blacks constituted a critical part of the new nation's demography and economy, especially along its South Atlantic coastline and in northern port cities such as Providence, New York and Philadelphia. The colonies' population of slightly over a million included some 236,000 Americans of African descent. In the 15 years before the American Revolution, nearly 40 percent of the 222,000 immigrants who crossed the Atlantic to British North America arrived as slaves from Africa or the Caribbean.

The swelling black presence along the North Atlantic seaboard played a crucial role in the development of a distinctly American society in the British colonies. As Peter H. Wood notes, in the English controlled settlements Africans served as partners with Europeans in the construction of an evolving American culture. This world that the colonists — black and white, slave and free — subsequently "made together" in the areas of work, family, language and spiritual life came to reflect a strong African ambience. Despite the enormous constraints of slavery, Africans had an immediate, varied, and lasting influence on the character of American culture because of their large numbers and broad distribution throughout the colonies.

The American Revolution freed England's 13 colonies from control of the mother country but produced ambiguous results for the new republic's black populace. As British critics of the rebellion often noted, those colonists most loudly protesting limitations on their own freedom within the Empire were often the owners of slaves. And, while the war for independence was fought with the aid of 5,000 blacks, the patriots' successful struggle for freedom did not generate the broad emancipation of enslaved African Americans. The republican idealism that spawned the rebellion led the northern states, where it was economically feasible, to adopt gradual emancipation plans in the two decades following the American colonists' victory. Elsewhere slavery remained pretty much untouched.

The Southern states, where the economy was slave-based and 90 percent of the slaves resided, did little more than make voluntary manumission easier for liberal masters. Furthermore, the new Constitution of the United States, ratified in 1789, comprised contradictions and compromises on the issue of involuntary servitude. The Founding Fathers provided for, but delayed for 20 years, the termination of American participation in the international slave trade, assured federal support for the capture and return of fugitive slaves, and, through the infamous three-fifths clause, guaranteed the political power of slaveholders by agreeing to count three-fifths of the slaves in determining representation in Congress. When the first ten amendments known as the Bill of Rights were added to the Constitution in 1791, they provided for the protection of the rights of free men from encroachment by the federal government, but left the control of slaves up to the individual states.

When the Virginia statesman and slaveholder, Thomas Jefferson, became the third president of the United States, the country's black population had grown to over one million. African Americans made up just under 20 percent of the entire population. Nine out of ten were still enslaved, however, and living below the Mason-Dixon boundary line that divided the North from the South. They built and tended the homes of their white masters, tilled the fields their masters owned, and toiled in their masters' workshops and factories. Although, as historians have shown, slaves were sometimes permitted to produce extra food for themselves by tending crops or raising livestock and sometimes to market their own products, the most reward they usually gained from their toil was the pleasure derived from the act of creation that permitted some affirmation of their humanity.

The "peculiar institution" of slavery, now an exclusively Southern practice, expanded with the development of the Cotton Kingdom in the early 19th century as the population of the southern states shifted to the south and west from the original areas of slave concentration around the Chesapeake Bay and in the low country of South Carolina and Georgia. Three-quarters of the region's slaves were involved in agricultural labor and by the mid-19th century over half worked in gangs on the cotton plantations of the lower South. Most of the slaveholders owned only a handful of slaves (five or fewer), but most slaves lived on plantations with more than 20 slaves.

Norrece T. Jones examines antebellum black plantation life. He explores the work, family, and religion of the masses of slaves and the ways forced black laborers struggled to survive and defy the power of the slaveocracy. He notes that a strong sense of community often surfaced in the slave quarters, a sequestered part of the plantation where resident whites rarely tarried. The semi-autonomous world the slaves forged there, Jones writes, became a breeding ground for subtle and covert forms of day-to-day resistance as well as more dramatic kinds of defiance.

Large numbers of slaves ran away, only to be captured and flogged and frequently sold away from their families as punishment. Some who fled settled among Indians, like the Seminoles, with whom they intermarried. Perhaps as many as 100,000 fugitives successfully escaped slavery for freedom in the northern states or Canada with the aid of the informal network of free blacks and white abolitionists known as the "Underground Railroad." Others, such as Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner and their followers, took up arms to end slavery.

Historian Herbert Aptheker has gathered evidence of some 250 slave revolts and conspiracies in records from the early 17th century through the Civil War. Rebellious slaves, however, never had ample unity, numbers, or weapons to organize successful armed opposition to the slaveocracy. Furthermore, as scholars have explained, slaves in the American South were so widely dispersed and so carefully policed that rebellion was virtually impossible. In addition, owners carefully encouraged family formation and ties as a further means of control over potentially rebellious slaves.

Southern slavery was not simply an agrarian institution. On the eve of the Civil War the slave population had grown to nearly four million. Between 160,000 and 200,000 worked in industry and about 6 percent lived in cities and towns. In areas outside the countryside discipline was notoriously lax, undermining urban slavery and creating broad mingling of the races which produced large concentrations of racially mixed people known as mulattoes. Around Charleston, South Carolina, and New Orleans, Louisiana, manumitted and free-born mulattoes formed a separate caste and some were even slaveholders, but most of the 260,000 legally free blacks living in the slave states were dirt poor.

Only a thin line separated freedom from slavery in antebellum America. William G. Shade contends that free blacks before the Civil War were only nominally free. A mostly destitute group, they were barred by law and custom from many of the rights that whites typically enjoyed. While some free persons of color prospered despite the prevalence of white prejudices, they were generally perceived by whites of all classes as social pariahs. As Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Roger B. Taney wrote in the majority opinion in the case of *Dred Scott* v. *Sandford* in 1857, "negroes of the African race" could not be citizens and "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."

Consequently, legally free African Americans, even those who lived north of slavery in states where human bondage was ended after the American Revolution, were regularly denied citizenship rights and frequently forced into separate black enclaves in the nation's cities. It was partly in response to the rising racial segregation they experienced in Northern urban centers that free blacks built autonomous economic, social, and religious institutions. These associations — especially the black church, the convention movement, and abolitionist societies — not only fostered moral and social development but also provided the institutional basis in the free states of the North for African-American resistance to slavery and discrimination.

UP FROM SLAVERY

The devastating Civil War that erupted in 1861 ended in the defeat of the Confederacy and the end of the long nightmare of slavery. By the war's end, the transplanted Africans who had endured bondage and grown in great numbers had been transformed from assorted African identities into a new people — an amalgam of black, white, and red humanity. By the time of emancipation, most African Americans had ceased to dream of a return to their ancestral lands. They had become acculturated, absorbed with an American consciousness and a desire to attain the "American Dream." The black masses and leaders — the politicians, ministers, teachers, independent farmers and small businessmen — had become with the proclamation of their freedom quintessential advocates of the democratic principles passionately preached, but poorly practiced, by the larger society. Moved by human rights tenets in the Constitution and the gospel of equality under God espoused by evangelical Christianity to which they were converted in colonial times, African Americans embarked on a campaign to achieve complete equality in America and rejected periodic calls for either separatism or mass migration.

The Emancipation Proclamation was a wartime edict that President Abraham Lincoln issued in 1863 freeing slaves in the rebel states. Since the president had no means of forcing Confederate authorities to comply with his order, the pronouncement proved to be mostly symbolic. According to Armstead Robinson, however, the Proclamation filled most blacks — even those who had seriously considered emigration to another land — with faith in the promise of America. When combined with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which formally ended slavery in 1865, and the subsequent ratification of the 14th and 15th Amendments guaranteeing black citizenship and voting rights, it created great hopes among African Americans that the great day of "Jubilee" had arrived, that the dark night of racial

degradation was forever over. These beliefs were buttressed by black participation first as Union soldiers in the war itself and then in the political process during Reconstruction when, for the first time, blacks were elected to public office at the local, state and national level.

Trust that they had been essentially relieved of racist repression was short-lived among black Americans, however, as the train of fatal events following passage of the 15th Amendment and the readmission to the Union of the seceded southern states led relentlessly to the resurgence of race domination and the establishment of segregation throughout the South in the 1890s. Robinson observes that the account of black advancement in the South after slavery and the subsequent revival of white supremacy is a sad chapter in American history. He notes that the nation's white leadership grew tired of "the Negro question" during the years following the Civil War and became more committed to sectional reconciliation than the protection of African Americans' newly granted rights. Compromises made between white politicians in both sections of the country led to the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the resumption in the former Confederate states of white "home rule."

After slavery, as Gerald D. Jaynes shows, most African Americans remained in the rural South from the end of the Civil War until World War II and worked the land as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. But as black political power withered, economic development waned, and the plight of rural labor worsened, many blacks abandoned agrarian life first moving to the growing cities of the New South which promised improved economic opportunities. Others looked west to Kansas and Oklahoma and a few even considered migration and colonization in Africa. Eventually most looked to the urban centers of the industrialized North in search of the promised land.

Carole Marks stresses the significance of urbanization and migration at the time of World War I. It was these twin processes that doubled the proportion of blacks living in cities between 1900 and 1940 and began the dramatic shift of the African-American population northward that would reach its pinnacle in the decades following World War II. The dramatic demographic shift of blacks from the farms and small towns of the South to the factories and sprawling cities of the North produced major consequences for African-American society, not the least of which involved the uneasy confrontation of the cultures of southern and northern blacks which was further complicated by the simultaneous arrival of thousands of blacks from the Caribbean islands, who had begun to come to the mainland in search of expanded economic opportunities. The two migrations and the remarkable mixture of sub-cultures that resulted precipitated the emergence of a new urban black culture in northern cities with distinctive regional traits, class structure and set of community institutions formed in response to the de facto segregation and economic discrimination the migrants faced whether from "down home" or the islands.

The social and economic changes accompanying the northern migration forced African Americans to form alternative racial strategies that ran along a spectrum of attitudes and actions ranging from assimilation to separatism. According to Wilson J. Moses, tension between these two positions characterized black protest thought from the 1890s through the two World Wars into the 1960s. These divergent strands of thought were most evident in the philosophies, politics and programs of the most influential African-American thinkers of this century — the conservative educator, Booker T. Washington, who disavowed integration and preached accommodation; the Marxist scholar, radical integrationist and advocate of organized protest, W. E. B. DuBois; the Jamaican immigrant and Pan-Africanist, Marcus Garvey, who supported selective black repatriation in Africa; the militant Christian social reformer, integrationist, and advocate of non-violent protest, Martin Luther King, Jr.; and the angry Black Muslim separatist, Malcolm X. Although only King was personally active in the "Second Reconstruction" following World War II, the theories and strategies associated with each of these thinkers effected the broad struggle for freedom and justice that emerged in the 1950s.

Clayborne Carson traces the Civil Rights Movement from its initial integrationist phase through the enunciation of the somewhat separatist concept of Black Power. Martin Luther King who emerged as the most forceful leader of the movement during the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott in 1955-56, and the major black organizations the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) stand out as key actors in the struggle that ended the long reign of "Jim Crow" in the South and led to the passage of major black rights laws by the U.S. Congress in the mid-1960s. The crusade, waged in alliance with liberal whites, often Jewish organizations and students, set the stage for the extensive integration between then and now of trained and talented blacks into the American mainstream.

A surprising consequence, however, of the campaign for black rights was that serious fragmentation of the movement occurred at the very moment of its greatest success with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act a year later. It was then that seething ghetto discontent erupted in bloody and costly riots across the country, black separatist ideologies gained mass appeal, the alliance of blacks and Jews was broken over strong political differences, and radical splinter groups such as the Black Panthers and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) appeared to provoke violent reactions from the white establishment. A subsequent backlash among white voters placed in office Richard Nixon and a succession of conservative Republican presidents who sought to check the effects of the civil rights laws and liberal Democratic initiatives that comprised Lyndon Johnson's vision of a "Great Society" and was moderately reflected in programs of the Clinton White House.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Studies of black folkways show that African Americans constructed from the savagery of slavery and segregation a distinctive and dynamic culture — with its own style of spirituality, speech, humor, music, dance, and dress — which sustained them psychologically through severe oppression and now has deeply affected the character of American society. Scholars such as Henry Louis Gates have noted that the most striking change in 20th century America is "the growing centrality of the black experience to the maturing national culture of the United States." The ubiquity of the black presence is pervasive in artistic, cultural and quasi-cultural endeavors of every kind from the frontiers of modern art through the written word to mass marketing exemplified by pervasive images on gigantic billboards of basketball star Michael Jordan.

Any consideration nowadays of American black culture commonly leads to the subject of "Africanisms," a term coined by anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits to describe surviving remnants and influences of African culture in the Americas. In his seminal work *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), Herskovits contended that slavery did not destroy the African heritage of U.S. blacks and traces of tribal customs had survived the strain of captivity. Moreover, some of the cultural traits that had endured had been transmitted to whites, producing some Africanization of the larger society. The culture of the U.S. came then not only out of Europe and America but also out of Africa.

At the time, most African-American intellectuals led by the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier vigorously rejected beliefs of the persistence of Africanisms in contemporary black life. To the era's black thinkers, such notions sustained racist arguments that prevented black assimilation into American society and supported racial segregation. By the 1970s, however, the views of black scholars had shifted and Africanisms were embraced by leading African-American academics in their efforts to enhance group pride and extol the African roots of a distinctive black culture in the United States. Currently, perhaps no place have African influences become more evident than in the visual arts. Images collected by Berrisford Boothe of

the African legacy in black art forms from the 18th century to current times illustrate the vitality of black art in America as well as the unconscious and conscious reflections of traditional African motifs in the work of black artists and artisans, in textiles, basketry, carvings, ironwork, and architecture.

While neither the full range of African culture nor the legal and economic systems survived the "middle passage," contemporary scholars have revived a portion of Herskovits's argument and acknowledge that fragments of African agriculture, cuisine, language, aesthetics, and music persisted and remained evident in modern African-American culture. Admittedly, these survivals are more pronounced in the Caribbean and South America than in the United States where the flow of Africans was cut off in the early 19th century and the population widely disbursed.

As novelist Ralph Ellison observed decades ago, black culture has long fascinated white imaginations and frequently seduced whites into becoming culturally part black without realizing it. In the 1950s, the white writer Norman Mailer described the "cool hipster" of the day as "The White Negro" who consciously aped aspects of the vibrant African-American urban culture. By the 1980s and 1990s, a period of tangible racial integration, black images and cultural forms were flowing into and profoundly affecting white American popular culture and mainstream American society. In the past two decades, the proliferation of and exposure to art, music, literature, plays, films and television shows about and by blacks as well as the prominence African Americans have achieved in sports such as basketball, football, baseball, and track have produced widespread awareness and appreciation of black culture and creativity among Americans at large.

In his *The Rhythms of Black Folk* (1995), Jon Michael Spencer suggests that the current absorption with black culture is most dramatically displayed in the extensive borrowing by "African Americanized" white teenagers of the alternative styles of music, speech, and dress associated with the black youth street culture of rap music, graffiti, and breakdancing known as "hip-hop." Born in the seventies amidst reductions of social services and the decline of urban black neighborhoods into lethal drug economies, hip-hop has produced considerable adoption and imitation among white youth. In fact, it is probably white suburban adolescents known as "mall rats" who provide the largest audience for hip-hop music and economically sustain its existence.

However, absorption with distinctly black street culture is not limited to white youth who have gone "black under the skin" and adopted a hip-hop style as an expression of resentment toward traditional white mores and behavior. Despite its typically tough image and raw language, hip-hop dress and music have also attracted black middle class youth who have mistakenly associated "authentic blackness" exclusively with the ghetto. It has also lured mainstream American capitalists who produce mass marketing of black urban styles and sounds because of their enormous commercial potential. The moguls of the clothing and record industry appreciate the fact that the "gangsta" ghetto look and lyrics, while awfully alarming to conventional sensibilities, sell well among the youth of all colors when properly packaged.

Assimilation of black culture can be seen most clearly in the greatest contribution of the U.S. to the musics of the world, the African-American idiom known as "jazz." As was noted in a recent *New Yorker* essay on blacks in the 20th century, jazz and its offshoots have produced a profusion of mulatto musics — a creative creolization of African-American and European-American strains that have spread their dominion across the whole world. Black musical traditions and genres, both sacred and secular, examined by Waldo F. Martin, also project aspects of the African heritage. The spirituals, gospel, blues, along with jazz and black popular music — including rap — all embody sounds of blackness with an African base and beat. Yet the instrumentation, scales, and harmonies have been those shared with Europeans and the creation and development of jazz has been until quite recently unique to American blacks among peoples of the African diaspora.

Like jazz, African-American writing is far more American than African. African themes have shaped the content of black prose and poetry, but the African heritage has not directly affected the artistic styles of black authors. Rather, their work has been distinguished by their focus on African-American subject matter and their analysis of race relations. A succession of major 20th-century black writers — Langston Hughes in the 1910s and 1920s, Richard Wright in the 1930s and 1940s, Ralph Ellison in the 1940s and 1950s, and James Baldwin in the 1950s and 1960s — combined artistic brilliance with searing social criticism.

Since their works first appeared in the 18th century, African-American writers have voiced distinctive strains which according to Gerald Early have deeply affected the tone and tenor of American literature. Beginning with the early black poet Phyllis Wheatley of Boston, they have illuminated, through various genre, the African-American experience and frequently advanced a social agenda. Examples of such efforts appear in black literature of the early 19th century as reflected in the African-American oral tradition, the slave narratives, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, the black aesthetic movement of the 1970s, and the present works of leading black writers — predominantly women, such as Toni Morrison (the first black American to receive the Nobel Prize for literature), Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou.

Whether vestiges of African culture considerably affect contemporary African-American society, sizeable numbers of American blacks are currently absorbed with the recovery and reclamation of aspects of an African identity. After many previous but sporadic cultural reclamation movements, such as the black nationalist Garvey Movement of the post-World War I period, African Americans after the decolonization of most of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s began consciously to address the critical issues of culture and identity. The rapid resurrection and restoration of black power in the land of their ancestors produced among African Americans a wave of new awareness and appreciation of their African identity and heritage.

From the revival of black rule and respect in Africa appeared attempts by emergent "Africanists" in communities across the U.S. to restore race pride and rehabilitate the damaged psyche of the black multitudes based on reverence of their African roots. They proposed not only a new racial nomenclature — that of black or African American in the place of Negro — but the popularization of African culture. They promoted, with major success, the use of African garb, hair styles, languages, names, dances, art, religion, as well as African-derived value systems and celebrations, such as "Kwanzaa," a black holiday supplemental to the traditional festivals of Christmas and New Year. Most importantly, they have called for the study of black history from an Afrocentric perspective. Drawing upon earlier arguments advanced by important black scholars such as historian Carter G. Woodson, the new "Africanists" contended that construction of the past from a black point of view would accurately reflect the positive realities of African societies and enable the black masses to develop pride in their ancient past.

Black history constructed from an "Afrocentric" view is currently at the center of sharp confrontations over curriculum reform in the primary and secondary schools in several states and a major scholarly controversy over African contributions to western civilization. Critics charge that the claims of "Afrocentric" scholars — such as George M. James, Cheik Anta Diop, and Yosef ben-Jochannan as well as Martin Bernal, author of the controversial *Black Athena* (1987, 1991) — are false and their assertions that ancient Egypt was a black African civilization, that Cleopatra was black, and Greek philosophy was stolen from the early Egyptians are egregiously wrong. Afrocentrism, in their view, is a charismatic rather than an intellectual movement that teaches myth as history.

RELIGION, CLASS, AND FAMILY

The history of Africans in America depicts remarkable perseverance and positivism. However dismal their condition has sometimes been, African Americans have generally been

steadfast in the belief that they would overcome adversity. As Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," black Americans have displayed a bottomless ability to aspire, develop, and acclaim life while afflicted with brutal injustice and shameful humiliation. This ability to endure affliction, King suggested, sprang from their strong spirituality, a central feature of the rich and resilient culture they created from their experience with slavery and segregation.

Since the late 18th century, when the diverse African faiths among the slaves gave way to mass conversions to evangelical Christianity spread by Baptist and Methodist preachers, African Americans have been among American society's most religious groups. Their reliance upon faith in God, their steadfast belief in Christ as the rock of their salvation, provided them with strength to withstand enormous suffering in anticipation of divine deliverance. Their conviction that the Lord would bless them mightily and redeem the world's darker races sustained their belief in heavenly salvation as well as in worldly liberation and elevation. These themes constitute the thrust of Gayraud S. Wilmore's essay on black religion in America, in which he explains the central role the black church has played in African-American culture.

Since the 1950s, those African Americans who have been able to take advantage of the new opportunities in the areas of law, education, and politics created by the success of the Civil Rights Movement have made rapid progress. After World War II, local and federal administrations were forced, through political pressure or civil rights laws, to begin combatting discrimination in hiring. The effect of these advances in employment opportunities was the emergence of an enlarged black bourgeoisie that was fundamentally different from that acidly described by E. Franklin Frazier a half century ago. Between 1960 and 1965 alone, 380,000 African Americans acquired white-collar employment, extending the black middle class to about 4 million.

By 1990 nearly half (46 percent) of all employed blacks held white-collar positions; one third of black families earned between $25,000 and $50,000, and 15 percent earned over that amount. The number of college graduates was increasing faster for blacks than for whites and the proportion of African Americans enrolled in the nation's colleges and universities equaled the proportion of blacks in the total population. Robert Gregg discusses the ways in which this flowering of the black middle class was made possible by changes in the American job market, in government civil service, the armed forces, industrial labor, and the universities.

For the privileged class of blacks, the present represents the very best of times. Members of the new black middle class readily concede that present opportunities for prepared African Americans are unprecedented. But even though the present constitutes a season of great hope and expectations for the black bourgeoisie, they perceive the urgent plight of many poor blacks and understand that a downward turn in the economy could threaten their own lifestyle and status. They also strongly resent the fact that racial prejudices still thwart the mobility of black executives to move to the top levels of their professions. The reality of continued bigotry in the workplace has produced barely contained rage and strains of black nationalism, which may explain the prominent presence of black professionals at the Million Man March in Washington organized in late 1995 by the Nation of Islam's leader, Minister Louis Farakkhan. Ironically, surveys show that the black bourgeoisie is much more apprehensive about achieving the "American Dream" than are many of the African-American poor whose position in society is far more perilous.

For economically marginal blacks, perpetually mired in poverty, the present seems to be the worst of times. Slightly fewer than one-third of all African-American families, but over 40 percent of black children, live at or below the "poverty line" set by the American government. John Bauman shows that among the black poor there has emerged since the mid-1960s in America's cities an expanding black underclass. He points out that concentrated poverty in urban centers has produced a large sub-population of chronically poor African Americans —

mainly youths — who exist outside the occupational system virtually trapped in permanent unemployment and inclined toward criminal behavior, especially drug use and trafficking. It is a startling fact that today one third of the nation's black males between 20 and 29 years of age are entangled in the criminal justice system.

The various public policy prescriptions advanced thus far to arrest urban deterioration, when work disappears, and rebuild communities have experienced only modest success. Recent press reports indicate that the Department of Housing and Urban Development of the Clinton administration discarded old public housing strategies and tore down hundreds of failed high-rise apartment buildings and replaced them with mixed-income houses that can retain a core of middle-class professional residents. In some cities, communities are building better houses and schools with the aid of innovative public private partnerships. But the overall formula has yet to be found to renew damaged souls among America's urban poor and jobless.

Thirty years ago Daniel P. Moynihan, the former U.S. Senator from New York, popularized the correlation between poverty and the increase in female-headed black households. Since then the "crisis" of the black family has been a topic of constant debate among scholars and policymakers concerned with the problem of black poverty. Walter B. Allen's study of black family structure and status questions some facile assumptions commonly reflected in the media about the quality of black life in modern America. He contends that characterizations of the black family headed by a single mother with several children living in an insect-infested tenement tend to ignore the extensive regional, ethnic, and income differences among black families and distinctions in values and lifestyles. The picture he paints is not nearly as bleak as commonly portrayed.

Most black families, Allen shows, have escaped the cycle of deprivation and destruction and the typical black family is middle class. Ability and opportunity have permitted these families to move into areas of American life previously off-limits to blacks. Yet they face most of the problems that plague middle class families in general, compounded by the effects of racism and economic insecurity inherent in their newly attained status. There are relatively few black families like that portrayed on the popular television series, *The Cosby Show*.

But lest it be forgotten, 30 percent of America's black families have sunk deeper into poverty and become isolated from the American mainstream, increasingly located outside the educational system, without jobs, consigned to high crime areas, and facing limited futures. Moreover, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the proportion of black families headed by married couples continues to shrink. It reports that the figure fell to 46 percent in 1997. It was 68 percent in 1970 and was 50 percent in 1990.

The present plight of poor black families is a product of multiple factors. Industrial decline in urban areas, the proliferation of guns and illegal drugs, the failure of the public school system, and massive unemployment are critical contributors to the crisis of impoverished black husbands, wives and children. Another, suggests Beverly Guy-Sheftal, is the distinctive place of African-American women in a society, where they have long been confronted with the challenge of a "woman question and a race problem." The prevalence and power of both racism and sexism have made it doubly difficult for black females to create successful and satisfying lives for themselves.

Some of the special tensions felt by black women are mirrored in the stress and strain between white and black feminists in the women's movement. According to critics, sisterhood across racial boundaries has been persistently undermined by hostility, jealousy and competition. An added complication is the historically determined tension between black males and females, dramatically played out before the world media during the televised hearings of law professor Anita Hill's allegations of having been sexually harassed by Supreme Court nominee Judge Clarence Thomas when working for him at a government agency. Even so, neither race

nor gender alone can explain the complexity of the black female experience compelling black women to fight on both fronts. The examples of individuals like Sojourner Truth, the abolitionist and feminist, Ida Wells Barnett, the Progressive social reformer and anti-lynching crusader, Mary McLeod Bethune, educator and New Deal official, and Pauli Murray, lawyer, minister, educator and one of the founders of the National Organization for Women (NOW), provide dramatic proof of how black female leadership has linked liberation with freedom from both racism and patriarchy.

A DREAM DEFERRED

Color continues to pose a challenge as well for American education. The condition of black education in the U.S. since the 1954 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown* v. *Board of Education of Topeka*, which declared the doctrine of "separate but equal" in education unconstitutional, presents a paradoxical pattern of improvement and frustration. Stephen Butler's study of the struggles over desegregation, busing, and affirmative action as well as the quality of schooling reveals the country's recent achievements and failures in advancing black education.

On the positive side, nearly every indicator of educational improvement signaled in the decade or so after Brown that a revolution in schooling had taken place in black America. From the mid-1960s into the early 1970s most of the school districts in the South were successfully integrated. By 1980 the median years of schooling completed by African Americans was twice what it had been at the time of World War II and only slightly below that of whites. Over half of all black adults were high school graduates. The proportion of African Americans who were college graduates was higher than the proportion of high school graduates in 1940, and well above the percentage of whites who graduated from college in 1960. The proportion of black high school graduates enrolled in college had moved close to that of whites.

While such statistics suggested that blacks and whites were receiving comparable instruction, some facts about black education caused alarm. The contrasting educational experiences of African Americans and other Americans has been starkly reflected in the outcomes of standardized academic achievement tests; black school children still score lower on such tests than most other students. This is due partly to racial bias in the tests. The difference in scores also closely correlates with the growing racial isolation of inner-city black youth in deteriorating public school systems. In just a decade from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, as a result of working and middle-class flight among whites and African Americans, the urban core of the country's major metropolitan areas has become increasingly black, poor, marginalized, and populated by a growing underclass. Robert Crain of Columbia University claims that the "great barrier to black social and economic mobility is isolation from the opportunities and networks of the middle class."

The conditions frequently faced by black school children in isolated poverty settings reflect what Jonathan Kozol calls the "savage inequalities" of America's urban public educational system. The high drop-out rates and poor performance of the survivors have led some black parents and teachers to adopt separatist strategies that reject the very reasoning of the Brown decision. They would carry the concern for black studies and Afrocentric curricula from the colleges into the schools and even establish self-segregated black academies, especially for young men, who studies report are at particular risk in today's drug-ridden and violence-prone urban ghettos.

Despite positive changes made to remove racial bias in law enforcement agencies and the courts, skin color still affects equitable execution of the law and dispensation of justice. The disproportionately high rate of black arrests, convictions, incarceration, and death penalties provide graphic proof of the role that race still plays in the criminal justice system. At the

same time, the public furor over the widely publicized Rodney King case, where policemen were caught on camera brutally beating a black man suspected of drunken driving, and the murder trial of O.J. Simpson underscore the power color continues to exert in our courtrooms.

Donald G. Neiman's review of key Supreme Court decisions since 1970 on racial discrimination and affirmative action — benign racial, ethnic and gender preferences — provides telling examples of the racial division that still cuts deeply across American society. It shows that Americans are bitterly divided over employment, contractual, and admissions programs involving racial preferences. One faction, comprised mainly of white and a few black conservatives, opposes affirmative action as reverse discrimination. The other, essentially liberal in political outlook and multiracial, defends such programs as needed measures to compensate for past discrimination and believes preferential programs have been the most effective means for bringing blacks and other minorities into the national mainstream.

Many blacks fear that the Supreme Court has forgotten the lessons of the nation's racist past and plans to end affirmative action programs on grounds that special allowances for minority groups unfairly penalize members of the majority. They are especially troubled that the Court recently struck down the practice of drawing congressional district lines on the basis of race to expand black representation and let stand a Circuit Court ruling in the Hopwood case that invalidated the affirmative action program at the University of Texas Law School and could endanger all such plans at public education institutions. Critics argue that, in its emphasis on color-blind justice, the Court has ignored the basically racial justification for the 14th and 15th Constitutional Amendments and the civil rights legislation of the 1960s by arguing that race cannot be a "factor" in policies designed to correct the effects of three and a half centuries of racism.

The results of black political empowerment in the last 30 years remain ambiguous as well. The way forward has been eased by the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. Lawrence J. Hanks points out that the battle for black political equity has made tremendous strides since the late 1960s. The voting rights act of 1965 was a milestone in the modern struggle of African Americans for equality. It provided the catalyst for black voter registration and extensive black participation for the first time since Reconstruction, resulting in the election of a critical mass of black officials nationwide. By the early 1990s there were nearly 6,000 black elected officials in the country, mostly at the local level.

Another important result has been the increased political prominence of the Congressional Black Caucus. Black members of the House of Representatives grew from 13 in 1970 to 39 in 2003. In the last decade, there was also one African-American senator — Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois, the first black woman to attain that position. Because of its members' high degree of solidarity, the Caucus presently constitutes a significant voting bloc on Capitol Hill. African Americans now have a substantial voice in Washington. Although there are two black Republicans seated in the House of Representatives, the other members of the Caucus are all Democrats as are 90 percent of African-American voters.

The Reverend Jesse Jackson's campaigns in 1984 and 1988 for the presidency as a Democratic candidate provide notable evidence of the fact that black political action has mainly shifted from the streets of America's cities where massive demonstrations had been previously mobilized to promote civil rights to the halls of local, state and national assemblies. The failure thus far, however, of black elected officials to muster sufficient power to markedly affect public policy toward minority issues remains a frustration for black communities across the country and is the source of vigorous dissent between liberal and conservative blacks over the agenda and tactics of black leadership.

A related area of concern for numerous American blacks, writes William R. Scott, is the role of blacks in the construction of the nation's foreign policy. Acutely appreciative for the

first time of their identity as people of African descent, expanding numbers of African Americans have become concerned about the content of America's relations with African nations. Headed by lobbying organizations, such as TransAfrica in Washington, D.C., blacks have become increasingly engaged in efforts to affect U.S. policies toward the land of their ancestors. Scott surveys the history of how African Americans have evolved an Africa outlook in an examination of images of Africa, back-to-Africa movements, Pan-Africanism, inter-continental relations, and the cultural reclamation of the African heritage, as evidenced in the Ethiopian Defense Movement of the 1930s and the Free South Africa Movement of the 1980s. The mass response of U.S. blacks to the Italo-Ethiopian crisis and mobilization against South African apartheid mark milestones in the reclamation of an African identity among Americans of African ancestry and show the extended time it took to acquire the amount of African awareness and public influence required to affect America's relations with Africa and other parts of the black world.

Even though the racial tangle has yet to be completely set straight and color remains a factor affecting black life-chances, racism in America is no longer the dominant force it once was. As sociologist William J. Wilson has argued in his highly controversial study *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), the strength of color prejudice has subsided greatly over the last part of the present century as a determinant of black social mobility. "Race relations in America have undergone fundamental changes in recent years, so much so that now the life chances of individual blacks have more to do with their economic class position than with their day-to-day encounters with whites."

Through new opportunities opened in such fields as business, education, and politics, often due to affirmative action, many educated blacks have entered prosperous and prestigious positions at a rate comparable to or exceeding that of whites with similar qualifications. While the average income of college-educated black males has increased to 95 percent that of their white counterparts, the incomes of college-educated black females actually exceed those of white women with similar background. Thus, says Wilson, the forces thwarting the upward mobility of the vast black underclass appear to be more related to the evaporation of factory jobs than to racial discrimination.

Debate over the causes of continued black deprivation raises difficult questions about the future political course of African Americans. Charles Hamilton forecasts that the black agenda will be driven by the state of the black poor but notes that civil rights should not be ignored in a society that remains so race conscious. He also ponders the strategies leaders should now chart. His response envelops a range of options, such as coalition politics — a tactic that might mean mending ties with American Jews recently disrupted mainly by discord over racial preferences — as well as massive public assistance programs and collective black action, as prescribed at the Million Man March. The success, of course, of any plan cannot be predicted with any certainty. Perhaps the only thing that can be confidently said is that the nation's stability and prosperity in the new millennium depends considerably on its determination to finally make the American dream realizable for all its citizens; and actualizing that commitment depends largely on the development across the country of a serious "conversation on race."